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Items for information: statistics on drugs and drug use

United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime

Note by the Secretary-General

In accordance with a request of the Statistical Commission at its fortieth session (see E/2009/24, chap. I.A), the Secretary-General has the honour to transmit the report of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime on the status of crime and drug statistics. The report provides an overview of the activities of UNODC and discusses the challenges faced in the collection, analysis and dissemination of drug and crime statistics at the national and international levels. It also presents the concerns raised by the Commission on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice and the Commission on Narcotic Drugs in relation to the quality and availability of crime and drug data. Based on an expert consultation, the report presents suggestions on how to improve the tools used by the Office in the collection of drug and crime statistics and calls for a more active involvement of national statistical offices, particularly in relation to crime statistics and the implementation of victimization surveys. The Crime Commission requested that the Statistical Commission be consulted in the implementation on its resolution on data collection. The Statistical Commission is invited to take note of the report.

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Report of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime on statistics on drugs, drug use and crime

I. Crime statistics

A. Background

1. Statistics on crime represent a crucial element for crime prevention policymaking and are collected by virtually every country. Nevertheless, the availability of comparable information on crime at the international level is very limited. By their nature, administrative data on crime reflect the criminal justice response to criminal events that are brought to the attention of authorities, rather than the actual amount of crime committed. This makes crime statistics particularly difficult to compare across countries. Over the past few decades, victimization surveys have become an important complement to administrative data recorded by the police and the criminal justice system. Several countries regularly carry out household surveys on victimization and the data are largely used to monitor and develop policy.

2. Although victimization surveys have proved to be a very practical tool for many countries, including developing countries, to obtain estimates of crime levels, only in a few countries are these surveys carried out or coordinated by national statistical offices. Other Government institutions or non-governmental organizations are more often engaged in this type of survey. Within certain limits, survey results may be comparable across countries, thus providing an important source of information at the international level.

3. As ways are identified to address the challenges related to measuring crime, crime statistics are increasingly attracting the attention of the statistical community. There is also a recognition of the central role that crime prevention has in social and economic development. The report of the Expert Group Meeting on the Scope and Content of Social Statistics (ESA/STAT/AC.161/L.6), held in New York from 9 to 12 September 2008, identified crime and criminal justice as one of the major social concerns to be accompanied by a relevant data-collection system. Among the emerging issues identified by the Expert Group, three fall in the area of crime statistics (classification of crimes, human trafficking and violence against women).

B. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime and international activities in the field of crime statistics

4. The work of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and other international activities related to crime statistics can be classified into three areas: data collection, analysis and dissemination; development of methodology; and technical assistance to countries.

1. Data collection and dissemination

5. Crime and criminal justice statistics have regularly been collected by UNODC since the 1970s. The United Nations Survey of Crime Trends and Operations of Criminal Justice Systems collects police and judicial statistics from all Member

States. The Survey has been conducted 11 times so far, with data gathered for the period 1976 to 2008.[1]

6. The Survey of Crime Trends is carried out in cooperation with the Statistics Division of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs and sent to national statistical offices and to Ministries of Foreign Affairs in all Member States.[2] Data collected through the Survey is published on the Internet. Country coverage is usually around 50 per cent of the 192 countries. In 2009, UNODC compiled statistics on intentional homicide with an expanded geographical coverage (198 countries), with the objective of maintaining a wide international series of statistics on one of the most relevant crime indicators.[3]

7. In its resolution 2009/25 on improving the collection, reporting and analysis of data to enhance knowledge on trends in specific areas of crime, the Economic and Social Council requested UNODC to establish an intergovernmental working group of experts to review and improve international data-collection tools and reporting systems in order to increase the accuracy and quality of data on the world crime situation, and to report thereon to the Commission on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice in coordination with the Statistical Commission. In order to address the requests contained in that resolution, an open-ended intergovernmental Group of Experts will meet from 8 to 10 February 2010 in Argentina. It is expected that the meeting will develop recommendations on the improvement of tools for the collection of relevant crime data, in particular the United Nations Survey of Crime Trends and Operations of Criminal Justice Systems, and of the collection, collation, analysis and reporting processes.[4] Participants at the meeting will include representatives from crime and criminal justice institutions and national statistical offices. Another expert consultation took place in January 2009, which provided input to UNODC in a number of areas, including the revision of the Survey questionnaire and the development of core indicators.

2. Methodology development

8. UNODC has developed and promoted a number of standard methodologies in the field of crime to support countries in the collection, analysis and dissemination of administrative and survey data. The *United Nations Manual for the Development of a System of Criminal Justice Statistics*[5] represents international methodological standards and guidelines in this area. In addition, UNODC and the Economic Commission for Europe (ECE) have recently finalized the Manual on Victimization Surveys, which aims to support Member States in the design and implementation of household surveys on crime and victimization. Jointly with the Conference of European Statisticians, UNODC is now pursuing a new area of work on crime classification to be used for statistical purposes at the international level. The

[1] Results and responses are available from the UNODC website: www.unodc.org/unodc/en/data-and-analysis/United-Nations-Surveys-on-Crime-Trends-and-the-Operations-of-Criminal-Justice-Systems.html.

[2] A different process is followed for European Union countries where questionnaires are sent to a national focal point for crime statistics who has been appointed to serve in a Working Group established at the Statistical Office of the European Communities.

[3] International homicide statistics are also accessible through UNdata (http://data.un.org).

[4] The report of the Group of Experts will be submitted to the Commission on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice at its nineteenth session, to be held from 17 to 21 May 2010.

[5] United Nations publication, Sales No. E.03.XVII.6.

ECE/UNODC Task Force on Crime Classification started its work at the end of 2009 and is expected to have finished by the end of 2010. The main outputs will be a set of principles on international crime classification systems for statistical use and a case study of selected offences. Furthermore, UNODC is involved in inter-agency efforts on the development of indicators on violence against women and juvenile justice information.

3. Technical assistance

9. UNODC continues to provide technical assistance to requesting countries to carry out victimization surveys and improve the collection and analysis of crime and criminal justice statistics. The primary targets for assistance are usually statistical units of crime and criminal justice institutions, national and subnational observatories on crime and national statistical offices. Within national statistical offices, UNODC aims to enhance their capacity to efficiently coordinate crime statistics and to include more systematically the use of victimization surveys (or apply victimization modules in ongoing surveys) into their national statistical plan.

C. Challenges in the field of crime statistics

10. Despite the progress made by countries and international organizations to improve the system of administrative crime statistics and to implement or promote the use of victim surveys, a number of challenges remain. Given that administrative crime statistics are typically generated by police, courts and prisons, the national statistical office often is not involved in the definition of statistical standards for crime statistics and in many countries it lacks the capacity to function as a national coordinating body.

11. With the exception of many countries of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development and a few developing countries, national statistical offices have not yet fully integrated victimization surveys into their programmes or into official statistics, although their relevance has been widely recognized. Implementation of victimization surveys or the use of victimization modules in ongoing surveys is where the national statistical office can provide high-quality and efficient solutions for the improvement of the scope of crime statistics.

12. There is also a need to streamline the work on crime statistics disseminated at the international level in order to address issues related to the quality of data, especially as regards consistency, comparability, timeliness, level of disaggregation, validity, reliability, clarity and transparency. As a first step in this direction, the eleventh Survey of Crime Trends, covering the years 2007 and 2008, was designed with a view to achieving a simple instrument, composed of a core section and two thematic modules,[6] so as to collect more accurate, reliable and internationally comparable data. A simpler, more integrated reporting system may help in the process of assisting Member States to build their capacity to collect and report statistics on crime and criminal justice.

13. In order to increase the status of crime and criminal justice statistics among the international statistical community, it is important to re-establish links between the

[6] One thematic module covered the area of trafficking in persons through the collection of police and court data on the number of offences and characteristics of offenders and victims.

Commission on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice and the Statistical Commission. Despite the involvement of the Statistical Commission in crime statistics since the very early years,[7] this has not been a standing agenda item in recent years. The link between the two Commissions could help to alert the statistical community to the need to measure emerging crimes, such as corruption, and could provide solutions that otherwise would be developed outside the scope of official statistics. Through a more extensive involvement of the Statistical Commission, it may also be possible to increase coordination of work on crime statistics at the international level with a view to avoiding any possible duplication of efforts with other ongoing reporting initiatives, including those of regional and international bodies. As a result, more Member States may be encouraged to report and share their crime and criminal justice statistics.

II. Drug statistics

A. Background

14. Statistics on drugs are crucial for understanding the dynamics of the illicit drug markets and implementing and assessing the efficacy of policy responses. They provide the solid evidence for identifying trends, analysing long- and short-term changes and assessing the changing size of the markets.

15. There are six main statistical areas that make up a comprehensive drug monitoring system at the national and international levels: statistics on illicit drug production, use of drugs and their health consequences, law enforcement activities (such as seizures, arrests), trafficking (movement of illicit drugs within a country or across borders), the price of illicit drugs (at the production, wholesale and street levels) and the purity of drugs (wholesale and street level).

16. The capacity of countries to monitor illicit drug markets varies dramatically across regions and topics. In general, statistics on drug supply are more accurate and more available than statistics on drug use. This is because in the area of drug supply, statistics related, for example, to seizures or arrests rely on a Government policing apparatus that is available in virtually all countries, while proper statistics on drug demand, such as prevalence rates of drug use, require population-based surveys, which are not available in all countries.

17. In some countries there are national observatories or centralized bodies that coordinate the collection, analysis and dissemination of drug statistics, with the purpose of monitoring the overall situation of illicit markets. In other countries, different national authorities are responsible for the different areas of drug statistics and there is no coordination.

[7] Economic and Social Council resolutions 380 (XIII) and 390 (XIII), of 1951, indicated that the Social Commission and the Statistical Commission would work together in discharging the task of collecting international crime statistics.

B. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime and international activities in the field of drug statistics

18. The main areas of the work of UNODC related to drug statistics are the collection, processing, analysis and dissemination of data related to illicit drugs in order to develop an evidence-base that can provide information to the international community about the global trends in the various drug markets. UNODC also supports countries in their efforts to collect, analyse and disseminate drug statistics. The three main areas covered are described below.

1. Trend statistics on illicit drug use and supply

19. The main vehicle used by UNODC to monitor trend statistics on the use and supply of illicit drugs is the annual reports questionnaire and reports of individual drug seizures. These tools have been mandated by the drug-related conventions and the Commission on Narcotic Drugs and are used to collect annual statistics (or more frequent data in the case of individual seizures) from countries. Utilizing these tools and other existing sources, UNODC regularly informs the Commission on global trends in the markets for the major illicit drugs and produces the annual *World Drug Report* and various regional assessments which provide the international community with an in-depth analysis of the situation in the various markets. In addition to the analytical reports, UNODC disseminates data related to seizures, prices and production through the Internet. However, additional information should be regularly disseminated in order to make accessible all the relevant data collected through the annual reports questionnaire to policymakers, researchers and civil society.

20. In 2009, the Commission on Narcotic Drugs adopted a resolution requesting that data-collection tools and reporting systems utilized to collect information from Member States be reviewed and improved in order to increase the accuracy and quality of data on the world drug situation. In order to address that request, an intergovernmental expert consultation is planned for 12 to 15 January 2010 to review current data-collection tools and propose a revised set of processes for consideration by the Commission in 2010.

2. Monitoring drug cultivation and production

21. UNODC regularly implements, in joint partnership with selected countries, surveys[8] to monitor illicit crop cultivation and drug production. Results from these surveys are used to assess, at the global and country levels, the results of actions carried out by Member States in the fight against illicit crop cultivation. The programme builds national capacity to monitor the cultivation and production of plant-based drugs by supporting national and regional monitoring projects and by providing technical assistance and expert advice directly to Governments. The activities ensure that the results of the illicit crop monitoring and drug production estimates are comparable across different countries and are based on scientific principles and sound, transparent and internationally accepted methods.

[8] Based on satellite images, field measurements and interviews with farmers.

3. Support to countries to improve statistics on illicit drug markets

22. UNODC supports strategic development of drug-use data collection and monitoring in countries and regions where large data gaps exist. When resources are available, it develops and supports the adoption of cost-effective methodologies and supports countries to regularly provide mandated information to UNODC.[9]

C. Challenges in the field of drug statistics

23. In the past decade, there have been several improvements in the quality and availability of data related to illicit drugs, but a number of challenges remain. In many countries, a full account of the extent of use and production of illicit drugs has not yet been made because of a lack of technical and financial resources and/or political will. The result is that for some regions, and for some types of drugs, particularly amphetamine-type stimulants (ATS), data are very scarce. One of the areas where there is also less availability of data is the use of drugs, since comparatively few countries conduct studies to estimate the prevalence of illicit drug use, and existing studies may not continue therefore making it impossible to assess changes.

24. The cultivation of opium and cocaine is concentrated in a few countries. Because of remote-sensing techniques, this cultivation can be monitored with considerable accuracy. Estimates of the production of opium and cocaine, however, require information on the yield of the cultivated crop, which is measured with less certainty. UNODC is continuing its work to improve estimates of yields, but the lack of access to some cultivation areas and continuous meteorological and agronomical changes all pose considerable challenges.

25. The manufacture of ATS has occurred in more than 60 countries around the world. Manufacture occurs close to the consumer market in clandestine facilities and can spread and shift rapidly. Because of this, assessing the ATS market situation is more difficult, relying greatly on the capacity of Member States to collect and report accurate and timely data, which in many regions does not exist.

26. Given the lack of data in some areas and some countries, a number of assumptions and adjustments often need to be made in order to produce reliable and comparable national, regional and global estimates. UNODC faces a number of statistical challenges in defining proper methods to estimate data gaps in order to provide regional and global overviews of drug markets. A closer involvement of the international statistical community in the methods used to collect and estimate data would support a more rigorous use of solid statistical methodology.

III. Role of the Statistical Commission in crime and drug statistics

27. As early as 1951, the Statistical Commission was providing the direction for international work in the field of crime statistics. In 2010, crime is still a topic that is high on the agenda of the policy debate and there is an increasing demand for crime statistics at both the national and international levels. However, the Statistical

[9] Through tools such as the annual reports questionnaire and individual seizure reports.

Commission has not discussed the topic for many years. The same is true for drug statistics. The Statistical Commission needs to be re-engaged into the debate on crime and drug statistics by supporting the Commission on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice and the Commission on Narcotic Drugs in making decisions relevant to crime and drug statistics that are based on statistical principles. The role of the Statistical Commission could cover the following areas:

(a) Providing comments on the relevance and impact of the activities carried out by UNODC and other international organizations in the field of crime, criminal justice and illicit drug statistics;

(b) Providing advice to the Commission on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice and the Commission on Narcotic Drugs on issues they may need to consider in their deliberations in matters related to crime and drug statistics;

(c) Providing advice to UNODC on priority areas and regions where technical advice and assistance on crime and criminal justice statistics and drug statistics is most needed;

(d) Discussing the role of national statistical offices in coordinating crime and criminal justice statistics;

(e) Discussing the role of national statistical offices in the implementation of victimization surveys;

(f) Including a standing item on crime and criminal justice statistics and drug statistics under the item of its agenda entitled "Items for discussion and decision" to: (i) guide the work of UNODC and other relevant international organizations in the adoption of standard indicators and methodology; and (ii) advise the Commission on Narcotic Drugs and the Commission on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice on the finalization of the data-collection tools in the field of crime and drugs statistics.

28. The Statistical Commission is invited to take note of the views expressed by UNODC in the present report.